

Temple Beth Israel  
(Fraternal Spiritualist Church)  
1502 Second Avenue  
San Diego  
San Diego County  
California

HABS No. CA-1999

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37-SANDI,  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. CA-1999

## TEMPLE BETH ISRAEL (Fraternal Spiritualist Church)

Location: 1502 Second Avenue, San Diego, San Diego County, California.

USGS Point Loma Quadrangle Map, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 11.484780.3620180.

Present Owner and Occupant: Fraternal Spiritualist Church, Company (1975).

Present Use: Religious Services.

Significance: The Temple Beth Israel, constructed in 1889, is one of the earliest surviving synagogues in California. Although modest in size, the building's design and Jewish iconographic elements, such as the tablets of the law and the windows with panes forming the six pointed stars, are highly original.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: In February 1887 the Congregation Beth Israel was incorporated for the purpose of purchasing land and building a synagogue. By April 4, 1889 the building committee was considering plans for the new structure. By September 27, 1889, the building was finished (this was reported by the San Diego Weekly Sun, April 4, 1889, and the San Diego Union, September 25, 1889).
2. Architect: None known.
3. Original and subsequent owners:

The Temple was built on Lot G, block 207, Horton's addition. The following is an abstract of the complete chain of title.

- 1889 Deed of January 19, 1889, recorded in Book 142, page 365, C. R. Dauer and C. Westover to Hebrew Congregation Trustees, consideration \$5,000.00.
- 1926 Deed of March 18, 1926, recorded in Book 98, page 250. Lever, J. W. to First National Trust and Savings Bank of San Diego.
- 1938 Deed of August 25, 1938, recorded in File 57090 First National Trust and Savings Bank of San Diego to the Fraternal Spiritualist Church Company.

4. Original plans and construction: The September 25, 1889 San Diego Union gave an account of the appearance of the Temple:

"The temple is a neat redwood structure 56x30 feet with a five foot wing for anterooms on each side of the entrance, which is a square front with the tablets of the law rising from the gable peak above. The temple is a light brown with chocolate trimmings. Six ground-glass windows stained yellow, blue and rose lights the gallery. The upper half of the entrance doors is of ground glass. The interior woodwork is oiled redwood, comprising a wainscoting and four arched trusses supporting a gabled ceiling painted sky-blue. The walls are French gray. The front of the gallery is arched and it has a seating capacity of forty or fifty. The pulpit is carpeted with body brussels. In the wall at the rear the doors of the Ark of the Covenant stand out in fine relief. The carved work is of sugar pine and the panels of redwood. The aisles are, for the present, carpeted with striped cocoa matting, and plain matting covers the entrance hall and ante-rooms. The audience hall is seated with 250 chairs which are numbered, and a handsome chandelier depends from the center. Three-fourths of the seats are already rented."

The land was purchased for \$5,000.00 and the building cost \$3,500.00 (San Diego Union, September 7, 1889).

5. Alterations and additions: There were some alterations soon after the completion of the building, these included: the additions of an entrance porch, and a transom over the front doors; the alteration of the front doors and the large arched windows.

According to the "Anniversary Story of Congregation Beth Israel" the balcony was constructed in 1921 at a cost of \$1,500.00. This is problematical, however, since the balcony appears to be of the same period as the building and the description of the building in 1889 already mentions a "gallery with an arched front, seating 40 or 50."

When the property was purchased by the Fraternal Spiritualist Company in 1938, they dismantled the Ark of the Covenant at the rear of the sanctuary and installed an altar. They also constructed an addition to the rear of the building, sealed off the balcony, and enclosed the stairway leading to it (from an interview with James Bradford, President of the Fraternal Spiritualist Church). At some point the tablets of law at the peak of the gable were replaced by a large electric star. The present seats were installed in 1952 (History of Fraternal Spiritualist Church).

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B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

1. Temple Beth Israel: The Adath Yeshurun, later to become the Beth Israel Congregation, was founded in 1861. Among the founders were several prominent San Diegans including Marcus Schiller and J. S. Manasse, who were engaged in important mercantile operations in the area (see Kramer article in Southwest Jewish Press Heritage, and James L. Allen's article in Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly). The congregation held services in various homes and other buildings in the area. In 1886 the name was changed to the Congregation Beth Israel and was incorporated in February 1887 for the purpose of purchasing land and buildings for a synagogue (Gerson, Jewish Religious Life). This was during a major boom period of San Diego history. When the temple was completed in 1889 it was one of the first in California (the September 27, 1889 issue of the San Diego Union says it is the second temple in Southern California). Even before the temple was completed the congregation displayed an interest in reformed Judaism. In 1886 they had sponsored lectures on this subject (San Diego Union, November 4, 1886), and by 1906 there was clearly a separate reform congregation (San Diego Union, September 19, 1906). The congregation worshipped here until 1926 when they moved to a new building at Third and Laurel (Anniversary Story).
2. Fraternal Spiritualist Church: The Fraternal Spiritualist Church moved to the building in 1932. The founder of this sect was Dr. H. Robert Moore of Ohio who was said to have demonstrated psychic powers. After extensive world travel, Dr. Moore came to San Diego around 1930. With the help of local followers the group purchased the former temple from the First National Trust and Savings Bank of San Diego in 1938 (History of the Fraternal Spiritualist Church). The Fraternal Spiritualists have occupied the buildings from 1932 to date.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views:

Photograph of the Temple Beth Israel soon after it was built without the front porch. Collection Title Insurance Company, Negative FEP-1323 (photograph included in photo-data set).

An early photograph of the synagogue, but with the porch added. Collection of the San Diego Historical Society, Serra Museum, San Diego (photograph included in photo-data set).

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Gerson, Ralph D. Jewish Religious Life in San Diego, 1851-1918. Master's thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1974. Copy in Serra Museum, San Diego.

Historical Data Concerning the Temple Beth Israel.  
Researched by Teresa Jennings. In the files of the  
Historic Sites Board, San Diego.

History of the Fraternal Spiritualist Church. Copy in  
the possession of the church.

Stern, Norton. Notes on the Temple Beth Israel to an  
article by James Allen in Western States Jewish His-  
torical Quarterly, October 1970.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Allen, James L. "Marcus Schiller: San Diego's Jewish  
Horatio Alger." Western States Jewish Historical  
Quarterly, October 1970, pages 26-37.

The Anniversary Story of the Congregation Beth Israel.  
San Diego, 1952.

Kramer, William. An article in Southwest Jewish Press  
Heritage. September 13, 1974, pages 5, 12.

Several articles appeared in the San Diego Sun and the  
San Diego Union during the construction of the Temple.

San Diego Sun, September 1, 1887: The congregation con-  
templates a \$20,000.00 synagogue.

San Diego Sun, December 27, 1887: The congregation buys  
a lot.

San Diego Sun, April 4, 1889: The building committee  
considers plans.

San Diego Sun, September 25, 1889: The synagogue is  
finished and there is a long description (see section  
on original plan and construction).

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San Diego Union, September 26, 1886: The congregation has taken steps to erect a building.

San Diego Union, September 7, 1889: Mention cost of new building.

San Diego Union, September 27, 1889: Announces the completion of the synagogue and has a small line illustration.

San Diego Union, October 14, 1889: Announcement of the annual meeting to be held in the new synagogue.

Prepared by Robert Brueggmann  
Historian  
Historic American  
Buildings Survey  
Summer, 1975

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Temple Beth Israel, constructed in 1889, is notable for its original use of Jewish iconographic elements. The exterior decoration includes such Judaic symbols as the Star of David formed in the round windows, and the representation of the Ten Commandments at the pinnacle of the gable end.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The T-shaped building is one story with a gallery, and measures 55'-6" (three-bay front) x 41'.
2. Foundations: The concrete foundations are covered with wooden siding scored to imitate rusticated masonry. A wooden water table is above the foundations.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: The frame walls are covered with horizontal flush siding with recessed joints, and painted. The east (front) facade is divided by four pilasters into a large central bay and two smaller flank-

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ing bays. Each pilaster has a panel at midheight decorated in relief by rosettes and concentric circles. Each rises above the roof line and terminates in a tablet-shaped form. There are five pilasters on the north and south elevations, the two at the narthex (east) end have the same rounded cap and decorative panel.

4. Structural system, framing: Wooden frame.
5. Porches, stoops: The center bay of the east (front) facade has a concrete stoop with six risers, surmounted by a porch. The porch is composed of two pairs of Roman Doric columns supporting a gable roof, the underside forming a barrel vault. The addition of the porch occurred soon after the completion of the building. There are also two wooden stoops off of the fire exits on the north elevation and west addition.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The main entry is composed of recessed double doors, each with a single molded panel. The doors were altered soon after the completion of the temple. The doors are flanked by two engaged Corinthian columns, and surmounted by a stained glass transom, an early addition, with a blind fanlight. The fire doors on the north elevation and the west addition have five tiers of molded panels.
  - b. Windows: The east facade has two round headed windows, one on each side of the porch. The windows are divided into three sections, the top and bottom sections being movable sash while the center section pivots. The top and bottom sections have leaded diamond shaped panels. The windows were originally composed of four-over-four lights with a fanlight. They were altered shortly after the completion of the building. The gallery level has four round windows, each with a six-pointed star of colored glass. The north and south elevations each have four round-headed windows similar to those of the east elevations. Three are in the sanctuary, separated by plain wooden pilasters. One is centered in the narthex with a round window with a six-pointed star above.
7. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: The gable roof has a false front on the east elevation. The gable end, which rises above the

false front, was originally surmounted by the tablets of law, and now carries a large five-pointed neon star. Asphalt shingles cover the wooden shingles.

- b. Cornice, eaves: The cornice is composed of a paneled frieze running above an arcaded fascia. While the fascia continues on both north and south elevations, the frieze is only found on the narthex end of the building. The rafters are exposed underneath the eaves.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plan: There is a central vestibule with flanking bathrooms which leads into the sanctuary. The sanctuary originally had a raised dais with a solid railing that now has been replaced by an altar. There is a small addition attached to the west end. The gallery is on the south end of the building, over the vestibule.
2. Stairways: There is a stairway to the gallery at the south end of the vestibule which has subsequently been closed.
3. Flooring: The sanctuary and gallery have two-and-a-half inch hardwood floors. The vestibule is carpeted as is much of the sanctuary. The restrooms have flooring of linoleum.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls and ceiling are plastered. The restrooms and sanctuary have wainscoting which rises to window sill height. The wainscoting is plain with a molded chair rail and a baseboard.
5. Doors and doorways: All doors from the vestibule (restroom, balcony stairs and double doors to sanctuary) have an upper oval panel and a lower square panel. On the sanctuary doors the oval panel is glazed. The moldings above the doors form a quasi-horseshoe arch.
6. Decorative features, trim: The truncated gable ceiling of the sanctuary is supported by four redwood arches resting on pilasters which divide the space into three equal parts. Redwood trim is featured in: the heavily molded primary and secondary cornice; at the juncture of the roof planes; and in two parallel moldings above the Ark of the Covenant (now the Altar).

C. Site and Surroundings:

1. General setting and orientation: The Temple Beth Israel sits on the corner of Second Avenue and Beech Street. The



main entry is on Second Avenue facing east. The site slopes down to the west. The present owners, the Fraternal Spiritualist Church, own the lot directly north of the structure which is used for parking.

Prepared by Kim Spurgeon  
Project Supervisor  
Historic American  
Buildings Survey  
Summer 1975

### PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the City of San Diego and the County of San Diego. The recording project was completed under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS. The Temple Beth Israel was recorded in the summer of 1975 by Professor Kim Spurgeon (Kansas State University) project supervisor, and Robert Bruegmann (University of Pennsylvania), project historian, with student architects John Clagett (University of Houston), William Lee (Arizona State University), John Livengood (Syracuse University), and John Reddick (Yale University) at the St. Francis of Assisi Chapel, Museum of Man, Balboa Park. The drawings were edited in April of 1976 by Pat Burkhart, John Burns, and Fred Wiederman in the HABS office. The data was edited in January of 1979 by Mary Beth Betts, in the HABS office. Early photographs of the building are from the Collection of the Title Insurance Company of San Diego, and the San Diego Historical Society.

Addendum to  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D. C. 20240

ADDENDUM TO  
TEMPLE BETH ISRAEL  
(FRATERNAL SPIRITUALIST CHURCH)  
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San Diego  
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U.S. Department of the Interior  
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